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ABSTRACT

Role play is a powerful technique for skills and attitude development. It is now possible to combine the advantages of face-to-face role play with the potential of the online environment. This paper reports on a case study of an asynchronous, anonymous, online role play conducted within a teaching course for academic staff. The following key issues in relation to online role play are discussed: (1) What is role play and why use it? (2) How different are face-to-face and online role play? (3) What causes differences in participant involvement in online role play? (4) Is role play a Western game culture and does that affect role engagement? and (5) How important is debriefing and how well does it work online? Findings suggest that online role play may offer an effective learning process and that anonymity may be a key factor for participant involvement and comfort. However the online environment may decrease role engagement, and cultural and language factors may affect participant involvement. (Contains 33 references.) (Author/MES)

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A CASE STUDY OF AN ONLINE ROLE PLAY FOR ACADEMIC STAFF

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Abstract

Role play is a powerful technique for skills and attitude development. It is now possible to combine the advantages of face-to-face role play with the potential of the online environment. This paper reports on a case study of an asynchronous, anonymous, online role play conducted within a teaching course for academic staff. Findings suggest that online role play may offer an effective learning process and that anonymity may be a key factor for participant involvement and comfort. However the online environment may decrease role engagement and cultural and language factors may affect participant involvement.

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Key words

online, role play, academic development, anonymity, asynchronous, WebCT

Introduction

Role play has long been recognised by teachers and trainers as a powerful technique for skills and attitude development in the face-to-face environment (for example, Carroll, 1995; McGill & Beaty, 1995; Gredler, 1994; Turner, 1992; Eitington, 1989; Craig, 1987; Ladousse, 1987; Shaw, Corsini, Blake, & Mouton, 1980). As the use of online discussion tools within university courses continues to grow, the idea of combining the powerful learning possibilities of role play with the potential of the online environment is receiving attention. The concept of asynchronous, anonymous role simulation as a learning activity is of great interest to academics and trainers (Freeman and Capper, 1999). Various reports of online role play, simulation and role simulation as Freeman and Capper (1999) term it are appearing (for example, Ip, Linser and Naidu, 2001; Wills, Ip, and Bunnett, 2000; CAUT projects by Andrew Vincent and Penny Collings reported by Alexander and McKenzie; 1998). This paper reports a case study of an online role play and explores some key issues that have and emerged from the findings.

Background

The consideration of new learning tasks that become possible with new technologies should be part of the educator's strategic learning plan (Freeman and Capper, 1999). The writer thus decided to design and implement an online role play as an interactive learning activity within one module of a teaching course for academic staff at an Australian University. Previously, completion of the module had required participation in a face-to-face workshop and completion of an independent study handbook. The online role play was designed to trial an alternative to the existing face-to-face workshop that might offer more flexibility of access for participants and provide an opportunity to explore various approaches to a contentious topic within the course.

Sixteen participants were divided into two groups of eight participants each and given the same directions, information and role statements. The role plays were set up within a WebCT bulletin board and ran for five weeks, during which participants were expected to contribute to discussion

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from the viewpoint of the role they were playing. At the end of the role play participants were given access to the postings from both role plays and the contributions were discussed. Marks were not allocated to the role play, although a specified level of participation was a requirement for course completion.

Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation methodology was grounded in the interpretive paradigm, the central endeavour of this paradigm being "to understand the subjective world of human experience" (Cohen and Manion, 1994, p. 205). Case study method was utilised, in which the researcher 'observes' aspects of individual or group activity in order to "probe deeply and to analyse intensively the multifarious phenomena with a view to establishing generalisations about the wider population to which the unit belongs" (Cohen and Manion, 1994, p. 106-107). In this case study the role play moderator is a "participant-observer" (Cohen and Manion, 1994, p. 107), participating to some extent in the activity being evaluated.

To determine the effectiveness of the role play activity the moderator analysed the descriptive accounts (postings) and the face-to-face discussion responses. Participant responses to the activity were also evaluated by questionnaire using closed questions on a four point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree, with provision for open comments. The questionnaire and discussion covered the effectiveness and purpose of the role play; feelings about taking part; anonymity; and role engagement. Eleven of the fourteen participants completed the questionnaire and participated in the discussion. (Initially sixteen participants were allocated roles but two left the course.)

The Role Play

Description and Purpose

The educational purpose of the online role play was to support course participants in exploring a key, controversial educational issue for academic staff – whether to use norm referenced or criterion referenced assessment. A further purpose was to support participants' orientation to the university by having them interact with various roles within the wider university community and in this way become more aware of the wider context in which decisions are made within universities. A third purpose was to develop their skills in the use of online teaching technologies.

The role play was designed to provide participants with a realistic forum to discuss the issue – the letters column of a supposed local newspaper, the *Daily View*. The role play took place at a mythical university called *Idontgoto* University in which criterion referenced assessment had been used within a subject. All students had achieved 100%. Participants discussed the merits of norm referenced and criterion referenced assessment through letters to the editor on the bulletin board.

Each participant was allocated an Idontgoto University role within one of the two groups. Roles were: Vice Chancellor; Pro Vice Chancellor (Academic); Superi Or, a high achieving, high distinction student; Medi Um, a low achieving, pass grade student; Concerned Citizen; Faculty Member; Dean of Students; and Chair of the Student Representative Council.

Only the moderator knew which role each participant was playing and participants were not able to access the other group's discussion. Roles were allocated alphabetically according to surname except for one group of three participants from the same department who were split between the two groups. Participants in both groups were provided by email with the same scenario and directions.

Participants were required to monitor the bulletin board at least once each week over four weeks and respond in character to the postings. Postings were expected to make a significant in-role contribution to the discussion. In the fifth week they were required to make a final posting commenting on how the issue should be resolved. Required pre-reading was the university's Code of Practice – Assessment, and two brief articles on criterion and norm referencing.

The Scenario

The opening scenario was posted to both bulletin boards as a *Daily View News Article*.

> A lecturer at Idontgoto University, Dr E. Galitarian, has given all of her students 100%. All 38 students in the subject PHR356 Professional Skills in Phrenology have received grades of 100% because Dr Galitarian claims each of them gained mastery on all of the required skills according to criterion referenced tests. An expert in Higher Education, Dr Norm Alc urve, was contacted for comment and said: "Normally universities use norm referenced assessment, which means students can be sorted into different grades somewhere between 0% and 100%. With norm referenced assessment you would expect quite a spread of scores. On the other hand, where criterion referenced assessment is used appropriately, it is quite proper that all students should gain 100% if they have all reached the set criteria. It depends on what kind of assessment you consider appropriate."

During the role play the moderator made various postings in the form of a news item or editorial comment. These items were not pre-planned but were in response to the ongoing discussion. For example when one role play group's postings proposed that criterion referenced assessment should not have been used at Idontgoto University because it was compromising standards, the following Newsflash appeared.

> A leading educator at Ialwaysgoto University medical school (where criterion-based assessment has been used successfully since 1992) has challenged the academic staff of Idontogoto University to clearly explain to the international academic community the reasons why criterion-based assessment is unacceptable. Professor Will Igetafarego claimed, "We have been turning out medicos since 1992 using this system and our graduates haven't lost a patient yet. I'm sure the community doesn't want doctors who have been graduated by universities that give out degrees to students who only got half of everything right."

When an apparent lack of understanding of norm and criterion referencing emerged, a news item appeared which purported to be an interview with one of the experts in the field explaining the difference between the two. The expert was John Biggs, whose book, *Teaching for Quality Learning in Universities* (1999) is the set text for the course. Interview quotes were taken from the text.

Participation

Participants were members of academic staff from a variety of disciplines within the university. Seven of the participants were from countries in the Pacific Rim, Asia and the Indian Subcontinent. Three of these participants had been very quiet in the face-to-face workshops during the course, requiring extra effort on the part of the moderator to involve them in discussions. It was hoped that these quiet participants might find the online environment more conducive to interaction than the face-to-face workshops. The opposite was the case. Those who were quiet in face-to-face sessions were also 'quiet' in the role play. They made fewer postings than most other participants, their postings were generally shorter, sometimes repeating statements from other postings and/or making uncritical and sometimes confused statements, for example:

"... I believe a normal curve on student results is reasonable and should be the criterion reference assessments of standard model..."

"... It is my opinion that a better performed student in a number of subjects is likely to perform better in the rest of the subject..."

A few participants experienced initial difficulties in logging on and/or understanding instructions (despite having been given an introductory hands-on WebCT program). Others needed a lot of email prompting. In both groups participants did not attempt to enter the bulletin board until the second week of the four-week activity, even though participation was an assessment task within the course. The moderator found it necessary to send several emails to individuals and groups reminding them about the role play and encouraging them to take part. When some still did not respond, reminders about course requirements and requests to cooperate in the activity were sent. Despite repeated encouragement and reminders, four participants made only one or two postings.

It was nine days before the first posting was made to role play #1, with the Vice Chancellor adopting a parodic, dictatorial role and signing the postings Dr D. M. Igod:
"...I can assure readers that all (former) students of the late Dr Galitarian have been re-tested and the expected 5% have failed..."
Several characters responded to the Vice Chancellor offering advice ranging through tolerance, freedom of speech and one even suggesting medication. Role play #2 began after twelve days with little apparent commitment to character by most participants. Role play group #2 did not achieve the participation, interactivity or critical content of #1 over the next three weeks. All but one participant in role play group #1 posted at least three times but only two participants in role play group #2 posted the minimum required and, as indicated above, two dropped out of the course.

In role play group #1 most contributions displayed some evidence of thoughtfulness about the topic but not extensive knowledge. Issues such as equal opportunity, academic freedom and power were also mentioned if not explored fully, for example:
"... the norm referenced system is a means by which academics control the teaching of subjects for their own needs and thus their promotion chances..."
"...The matter of concern to your readers needs to be viewed within the broader scope of other subjects within the degrees that have PHR356 as just one component..."

In role play group #2 contributions were shorter, tending to repeat the *Daily View* postings, and were sometimes superficial, for example:
"...I am very glad to hear that the lalwaysgoto University medical school is successful with using criterion-based assessment. It would be interesting to know how many universities in this country are using criterion referenced assessment successfully..."

In role play group #2 only two participants began to explore the topic but never really addressed the key issue, for example:
"...There might be several reasons to cause the result: (1) Examination questions or other assessment methods such as assignments or essays are too easy. (2) The learning objectives of the subject are relatively low. (3) Assessment methods might not be reasonable ..."

Few participants in role play group #2 appeared to be engaged in their roles and there was little informed debate about the issue. The final postings in which participants were to indicate what the next step should be were not insightful. Either participants did not do the required reading or they did not understand the material. Some did not seem to have much idea about the role they were meant to play – for example the following response could be considered uncharacteristic of an authentic Student Representative Council Chairperson.
"...It looks very fair for all students since everyone got the same marks. In fact, it is not fair for bright students..."
The final postings, in which participants were to indicate what the next step should be, were also variable in quality. Most in role play group #1 summarised aspects of the issue and offered some kind of solution that might be considered to be at least partially educationally sound. Again those role play group #2 participants who had not fully participated, demonstrated little or no evidence of having done the reading or understood the issue, for example:
"... criterion based assessment involves high level of subjectivity which might cause discomfort for many people..."
"...I believe a normal curve on students results is reasonable and should be the criterion reference assessments of standards model..."

Engagement was also differential. Some participants like 'Dr I. M. God' had fun with the role, some adopted their role minimally, while others just made postings signed with the appropriate name. One participant who engaged with the student role wrote about their imagined experience with criterion referencing and added a sarcastic twist:
"We all felt proud of our achievements and it gave us additional confidence in our professional skills until you [The Daily View editor] came along and ruined it for us. Thank you for that."

Debriefing and Evaluation

Initially it had been planned to give all participants access to all role play postings and then administer the questionnaire online. Because participation was not as enthusiastic as expected, it became a concern that participants might not go online to read the other group's work or complete the questionnaire. It was therefore decided to conduct a debriefing and paper-based evaluation face-to-face within the course. The debriefing was intended to reinforce learning, clear up the many misconceptions about the topic, discuss the process and evaluate the activity.

In the face-to-face debriefing, several of the participants became involved in a discussion about the relative merits and uses of criterion referenced and norm referenced assessment and the role play process. It was noticeable that the previously mentioned 'quiet' participants again did not volunteer information unless asked and then made fairly non-committal statements.

Findings

From the questionnaire which was completed by eleven of the fourteen participants, eight participants agreed the role play was an effective process for exploring the issue and nine agreed that anonymity was a key factor in their involvement and comfort. All indicated they had contributed seriously to the discussion but only five indicated feeling engaged with their role.

Written comments about positive aspects varied and included: playing a role; seeing how differently others see things; seeing how role interpretation is based on culture; being in another person's shoes; discussion; interaction; a chance to learn; debate; having fun; exploring issues; anonymity; and feedback, for example:
"It was interesting to have people comment on things that you do and say, particularly things you don't think are being transmitted!"
"Ability to integrate learning, debate and fun."

Written comments about negative aspects varied and included: other participants who did not contribute seriously; not taking on roles; anxiety; time consuming; having to speak out; understanding some of the roles; and initial access problems, for example:
"Those who didn't do the 'fun' stuff as well as the serious stuff."
"Caused me a good deal of anxiety to participate."

Discussion

The findings above raise several key issues in relation to online role play.
1. What is role play and why use it?
2. How different are face-to-face and online role play?
3. What causes differences in participant involvement in online role play?
4. Is role play a Western game culture and does that affect role engagement?
5. How important is debriefing and how well does it work online?

What is Role Play and Why Use it?

Crookwell, Oxford and Saunders (1987, p. 155) describe face-to-face role play as "a social or human activity in which participants "take on" or "act out" specified "roles" often within a predefined social framework or situational blueprint." The use of face-to-face role play in education has been described as an "... attempt to understand human action and experience" (Yardley-Matwiejczuk, 1997, p. 5). Van Ments (1999, p. 9) writes "The idea of role-playing is ... to give [participants] the opportunity to practise interacting with others in certain roles." The adoption of the role may be short and episodic, as simple as a teacher asking a student to show a class how they think another person might react to a situation, or as complex as a group of people acting out a conflict situation.

Role plays are considered by Gredler (1994) as a subset of simulations, having less complexity and length. Simulation is a complex, evolving exercise while role play is a single incident (Gredler,

1994). In simulation participants do not invent background information or improvise facts or events. Instead they execute a particular set of responsibilities (eg. manager, client) using given information. In contrast participants in a role play do not receive detailed background information. They receive a brief outline of the situation and sketchy information about the role (eg, you are an angry student who has failed an assignment) and they are free to improvise reactions and events. Ladousse (1987) also indicates simulations can draw out more subtle nuances than role play. Yardley-Matwiejczuk views role play as much closer to simulation, stating that role play describes "a range of activities characterised by involving participants in 'as-if' or 'simulated' actions and circumstances" (1997, p. 1).

So role play is *simulation* in that it simulates the participant's idea of some other "real" world; but *a simulation* goes further by setting a system in place for the role players to operate within. In all events, role play may be described as a medium that provides an imaginary context in which issues and behaviours may be explored by participants who take on a specific role or character.

Why should educators use role play? Role play is a form of experiential learning that is widely used in training because it can lead to powerful behavioural and attitudinal outcomes (McGill and Beaty, 1995; Turner, 1992; Eitington, 1989; Craig, 1987; Shaw et al., 1980). Role play has long been used in educational and therapeutic settings to practise skills; explore sensitive issues; expose behaviours; and sensitise participants to other ideas, attitudes and values. Role play offers a unique potential for the generation of action (Yardley-Matwiejczuk, 1997) largely because it is such a flexible method with respect to range and depth of focus.

A well organised and operated role play can provide the experiences, and importantly the opportunity to reflect on those experiences, that help change attitudes or behaviour. It can be highly motivating and enables students to put themselves in situations they have never experienced before, where they can empathise with, and come to understand, other people's motivations. It can also give life and immediacy to academic descriptive material (Van Ments, 1999, p. 10-15). There is evidence that participants remember the learning from face-to-face role play long after they have forgotten much of the learning they learned in other ways (Van Ments, 1999; Gredler, 1994). Rapid feedback for both student and tutor is provided. Importantly, as noted by Ladousse (1987) role play can also offer the opportunity for people to have fun while learning.

Can we expect the same advantages from online role play? Are online role plays being developed simply because the technology makes them possible? Is role play an attempt to improve poor participation in an online environment? Harasim, Starr, Teles, & Turoff (1995) indicate that online forums moderated by novice web site designers are not well used and suggest role play as one of several approaches to improve participation. Wills et al., (2000) use role play in an attempt to enhance the use of an online database that was being searched in a shallow, perfunctory fashion by the online database users.

While improving participation in existing activities might be a reason some moderators decide to use online role play methodology, more positive reasons for using online role play include the advantages of an asynchronous, text-based medium within what is assumed to be a safe and low-risk learning environment. An example of this approach is a role simulation that enabled students to understand the complex pressures that impact on people in the financial sector (Freeman and Capper, 1999).

How Different are Face-to-Face and Online Role Play?

Face-to-face role play involves acting as another person through voice, gestures and actions. It involves immediate interpretation of, and reaction to, signals from others. Online role play is text-based, the writing can be done after reflection and may be edited. Written contributions may be more considered and more permanent. Obviously participants are able to utilise resources (people and materials) to prepare their contributions and can even discuss the role play with each other outside the forum.

This study raises the question – within the asynchronous text-based environment, do participants really take on a role in an immediately responsive way, or do they rather compose messages in a way they think would be expected of that role? If the latter, this would constitute one of the key differences between face-to-face and online role play. Participants could take part in online role play without actually engaging with their role and without observing others engaging in theirs. The writer suggests that if this were the case, empathy – the feeling of what it is like to be in someone else's shoes – would be unlikely to develop. Further, the absence of empathy might increase the possibility of participants responding stereotypically, which is one of the hazards of face-to-face role play (Yardley-Matwiejczuk, 1997; Craig, 1987) and stereotyping reinforces and sometimes creates prejudices. The writer noted that where role engagement occurred within this case study it seemed minimal, and the roles tended to be stereotypes rather than realised.

What causes Differences in Participant Involvement with Online Role Play?

This role play took place over four weeks and only one posting per week was required. It is possible that a shorter but more intensive experience might have encouraged more involvement. Berge (1995, p. 25) recommends that computer conference moderators constantly keep in mind individual differences within the conference. There may be a wide range of intellectual, personality, emotional and technical levels. Some face-to-face role play facilitators actually assess the role play skills of individuals and select those to play significant roles in order to ensure the role play is effective (Yardley-Matwiejczuk, 1997). Differential involvement is therefore to be expected, although it is a significant issue where learning is interactive and dialogic. The advantages of anonymity and asynchronicity are discussed below.

Online role play, unlike its face-to-face counterpart, can be anonymous. Most participants indicated their approval for the anonymity of the role play but is there any educational reason for anonymity? Does anonymity actually help people participate more – or even learn better? A problem in face-to-face role play is the level of emotional risk involved where a student is asked to perform a role in public and the performance is observed and criticised (Van Ments, 1999, p. 49). This risk is removed where roles are anonymous to other students and contact is limited to the written word.

Some writers have suggested that anonymity in online discussion may increase equity (Collins and Berge, 1995) and participation rates (Hartman, Neuwirth, Kiesler, Cochran, Palmquist, Zubrow, 1995; Connolly, Jessup and Valacich, 1990).

Freeman and Capper (1999) found anonymity helped non-English speaking background students to contribute to role play because students felt more free to "criticise" others, which they would not do in an environment where they could be identified.

McComb (1994) indicates asynchronicity is a particular benefit for those who are shy, uncertain or linguistically less able. Chester and Gwynne (1998) however note the difficulties for an Asian student communicating in a text-based medium. In this study, the three participants identified as low-verbal participants whose first language was not English posted responses that were either short, superficial or apparently confused. However the non-English speaking background participants who had demonstrated strong verbal skills in face-to-face activity were actively engaged in the role play using written language for critical analysis and/or humour. This suggests that for involvement, language proficiency and confidence may be more significant than cultural background.

Chester and Gwynne (1998) speculate on the possibility that antisocial behaviour may be a consequence of online anonymity in computer conferencing, at least with short-term interactions. This may relate to Gunawardena and Zittle's (1997) concept of "social presence" – the degree to which other people in an interaction are perceived as "real". Gunawardena and Zittle indicate social presence is a factor of both the medium and of the communicators and it is a strong predictor of "learner satisfaction" in computer conferences. Social presence is high in face-to-face and relatively low in text-based media. Anonymity would seem to reduce social presence even further.

A further argument against anonymity is the proposition that the keys to success in distance learning are honesty, empowerment, responsiveness, relevance, respect and openness (Palloff and Pratt, 1999). Within the higher education literature, Laurillard (1993) and Ramsden (1992) indicate that learning is a dialogic, constructive activity. This means learners need to be able to explain and critique their own and other's beliefs in order to test them, and this requires honest and open interaction. Few, if any, offline interactive learning activities in higher education are anonymous because educators expect their students to communicate and defend their ideas and hopefully to develop the generic skills of discussion, presentation and self-confidence. Indeed Pence (1996) actually suggests anonymity may be a hazard to the development of academic community.

Is Role Play a Western Game Culture and How does that Affect Engagement?

Role play, like any other teaching method, has epistemological implications. "Game culture will always reflect some complex interaction between the prior beliefs brought to the game by the participants and the scenario postulated by the simulator" (Benson, McMahon and Sinnreich, 1972). A role play scenario is in reality a statement that encompasses the designer's beliefs and cultural background. In this study, the scenario encompassed the designer's ideas about the roles of the Press and stakeholders; university culture; the connection between self and role; and the designer's penchant for parody.

Is online role play a comfortable medium for students from non-English speaking cultures? Differences in cultural styles have been noted by, for example, Ballard and Clanchy (1991) and Chalmers and Volet (1997) who indicate that many overseas students need time and support to adapt to an educational context where self-direction, active participation and critical thinking are emphasised. Those participants who were less actively engaged in their roles were identified as from non-English speaking backgrounds with low-verbal involvement in face-to-face workshops. As noted above, the non-English speaking background participants who had demonstrated strong verbal skills in face-to-face activity were actively engaged in the role play, adopting their roles at least minimally and with some humour. It may be that language proficiency rather than cultural background is the more significant factor in both involvement and role engagement.

How Important is Debriefing and How Well does it Work Online?

Van Ments (1999) emphasises that debriefing, where meaning is clarified and learning is underlined, is the most important aspect of face-to-face role play. Face-to-face role playing requires total immersion in the problem while the analysis of the role play requires a deliberate stepping back. Participants need the opportunity to dissociate from their roles, clear up factual errors and enter into reflective discussion.

What level of debriefing is necessary following online role play? Berge (1995) notes that the computer conference moderator's role includes the provision of summary remarks at the conclusion of the debate. Such a summary after the role play would help correct any misconceptions and inaccuracies. In this study the moderator noted that some misconceptions and inaccuracies were in evidence (and perhaps reinforced through the agreement of others). There was a need to correct these. A face-to-face meeting was held because there was a concern that participants might not 'attend' an online debriefing.

During the debriefing, the focus of discussion was on the learning outcomes related to the topic rather than helping participants step out of role. This was because participants indicated they had no feelings of engagement with their roles at this time, which was several days after the role play had ended. It is suggested that because it is possible for online role play participants to engage in stereotypical roles, the debriefing should deconstruct any stereotypes and encourage empathic discussion of the various roles. The level of role debriefing required after online role play, and the effectiveness of role debriefing online, require further exploration.

Conclusion

This paper has described a case study into an asynchronous, anonymous, online role play with participants in a teaching course for academic staff. Most participants reported the process to be effective for learning about the topic and appreciated the anonymity of the method. Some valued the opportunity to see the issues from different perspectives. Only some participants achieved engagement with their roles which tended to be stereotypical, and levels of involvement in the activity varied.

The study suggests that online role play can fulfil a valuable educational function but may not have the key advantage of face-to-face role play – the possibility of significant empathy through role engagement. It may have an advantage over face-to-face role play in that the online environment enables role players to be actively involved in an emotionally safer and lower-risk learning activity.

The study raises some issues for further exploration as follows.

- What level of role engagement is expected, possible and useful and how can empathy rather than stereotyping be encouraged?
- Is role play a Western game culture and if so what provision should be made for students from other cultures?
- How do asynchronicity, anonymity and the text-based interaction affect involvement?
- What method of debriefing is most appropriate?

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